Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/175562185

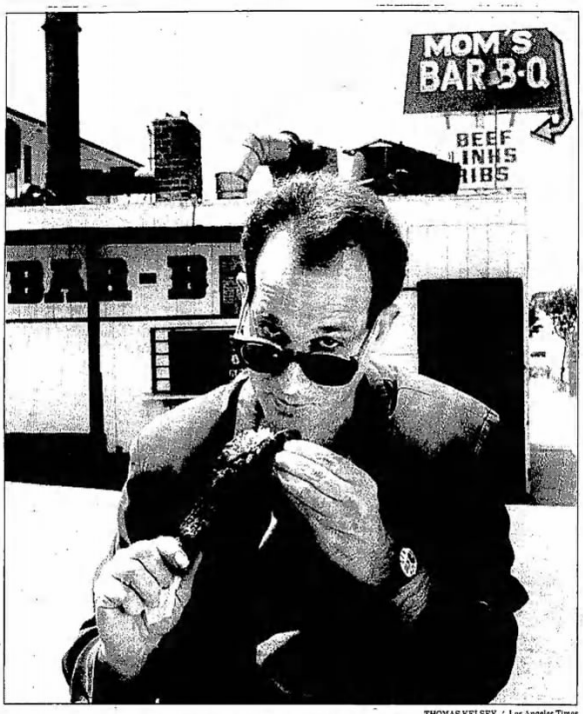
Downloaded on Mar 25, 2024

RESTAURANTS

Between Bytes

Carl Stone composes for the computer on a full stomach of L.A.'s spiciest ethnic foods

By JONATHAN GOLD



THOMAS KELSEY / Los Angeles Times
Carl Stone with a rib from Mom's, namesake of his composition "Mom's." Of his titles, he says, "It's instead of calling things 'Etude Number One.' "

Of the serious composers in California, Carl Stone is the one who has always performed in nightclubs as well as concert halls, for spiky-haired punks as well as the Ph.D-and-ponytail set. Like Philip Glass, he has a substantial pop audience, those who have gone beyond Brian Eno records to appreciate Stone's sophisticated, pulsing sound collages. He composes for the computer, not the orchestra; he plays the microprocessor the way Maurizio Pollini plays a Baldwin. Stone, 37, is easily the best-known young composer in Los Angeles.

Each of his pieces is named after an ethnic restaurant: Sukothai, Woo Lae Oak, Shin Kee, Pho Dac, Chao Nue, Kong-Joo.

Spicy Asian cooking is to Stone what the Immortal Beloved was to Beethoven, what opium was to Berlioz—an eternal source of inspiration.

"Hot food is the cheapest high imaginable . . . " Stone said, snagging the last chunk of crispy chile-fried catfish and waving his chopsticks for emphasis. Droplets of orange oil spattered the Formica.

" . . . and lately I've been eating a lot of barbecue," he said. "Much better than false drugs. Longer lasting."

I was too busy protecting the dregs of the glass-noodle salad to argue much. "Have some more duck curry," I said.

"I'm a real hot-chile junkie," Stone said. "This morning I had [the stinky fermented Japanese soybean mush] *natto* for breakfast, and I put hot salsa even on that. By the way, do you want the rest of those noodles?"

We were at one of L.A.'s first Thai restaurants, Vim, which had given its name to one of Stone's early works for the Macintosh. Like other joints on Vermont's pioneering Thai restaurant row—Arunee, Ocha, Thai Kitchen—Vim has pretty much escaped attention in the last few years, and seems to cater to a mostly Latino clientele. But Vim's portions are huge, its food blisteringly hot. He hadn't been back since the middle '80s.

" 'Vim' was composed a few years ago," said Stone, who is 37, "and I don't really think the piece holds up that well. It was kind of an experimental work. But I'm glad to see the restaurant's holding up just fine. It seems like basic country Thai cooking."

I took a swallow of Thai iced coffee. "Why do you name your pieces after restaurants, anyway?" I asked.

"It's essentially random," he said and maneuvered the glass noodles to his side of the table. "If I like a restaurant, I put it at the bottom of my waiting list. The next thing I write gets the name at the top of the list. It's instead of calling things 'Etude Number One,' say, or 'Sonata Number Three.' People always come up to me at concerts and say, 'Wow, that one *really* reminded me of the barbecued chicken at Chao Praya.' It's nice they feel that way, but that's not what I have in mind at all. The titles of the pieces are supposed to be abstract."

In concert, Stone sits behind his computer, screen glinting blue off his glasses, baggy '50s suit hanging from his frame. Occasionally he slides the computer's mouse an inch or two, very deliberately, or tweaks a knob on one of the various processors that tower to his left. His art is an ultra-sophisticated version of what a hip-hop deejay does—cynics have called him Mixmaster Carl—reprocessing and recombining anything from plucked, room-length stretched wires to old Smokey Robinson tunes into a thing wholly new. At his best, he leaves his audience with the sensation of a moment well-examined, of suspended musical time.

But a couple of days later at Sanamluang, the Hollywood Thai cafe and namesake of an '86 Stone computer opus, what was well-examined was a bowl of Chinese spaghetti, a Saturday-only special of noodles in a tart broth with a good handful of chopped, sour Chinese pickles.

"I've been trying to order this dish for years," Stone said, "but they'd never give it to me. I thought it was some kind of a plot." Last week a waitress finally told Stone that Chinese spaghetti was breakfast. It's usually sold out by noon. He poked listlessly at a clump of bright green pickle. "But this spaghetti isn't very exciting at all."

"Neither is this," I said, biting into a beef ball that tasted more scorched than grilled.

"We could get the curry noodles or the General's noodles, which are always great here, but I've eaten them a hundred times," he said. "Let's go for barbecue instead."

We drove south from Hollywood at noon on the hottest day of the year, a heat that overwhelmed the thin wisps of cool air drifting from the air conditioner of his Subaru. As we hit Koreatown, he snapped in a cassette, relentlessly bouncy pop from a Korean lounge singer named Mr. Lee. "I played this on my radio show [KPFK's Imaginary Landscapes] the other night," Stone said. "A listener went down to Koreatown looking for it, but the clerks at the record store just laughed. They had a whole *aisle* of cassettes by guys named Lee."

At 54th and Vermont, he slowed and pulled into the dingy parking lot of Mr. Jim's, a rib mecca whose radio slogan used to be: "You need no teeth to eat Jim's beef." (As poet Richard Meltzer once pointed out, if you actually *have* no teeth, it rhymes.)

"I like the way the meat falls off the ribs when you just rake your lips over them," Stone said. " 'Mr. Jim's' was the first piece I ever did that wasn't named after an Asian restaurant. But the sauce isn't really hot enough, and the hot links are too smooth." Time to move on.

He started the car and drove south to Imperial Highway, where the tiny rib shack called Mom's announces its presence in wood smoke a half-mile before its parking lot. I had raved for years about the complexity of Mom's extra-hot sauce until I peered into the trash bin and saw spent gallon jugs of commercial sauce and emptied bags of cayenne—not much of a secret recipe, but it worked. This time, we saw a truck from Pete's Louisiana Hot Links leave just as we pulled in . . . which explained the wonderment of Mom's hotly spiced links, and the perfect crunch of their skins.

"Next thing you know," Stone said, "we'll find out that they buy precooked spareribs from Noonan's and sweet potato pies by the gross. I don't care though—this is the best sauce in L.A., and the smoke

Please see Page 109

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.
Powered by Newspapers.com